ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-2

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Soviet Dancer, Home, Says Russians Exploited Him

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MOSCOW, March 9 — A Soviet ballet dancer who defected to the United States and returned to Moscow last year did so "because I was of afraid of reprisals against my family," and not, as the Soviet press asserted, because he was disillusioned with the American way of life.

The 33-year-old dancer, Yuri Stepanov, denied as "inventions" statements attributed to him in an article in the Government newspaper Izvestia on April 10, 1980. The statements said that the church group that helped him in the United States was a front for the Central Intelligence Agency; that the American "special services" tried to recruit him as a spy; that other Soviet defectors in America lived lives of alcoholism, degradation and despair; that his stay in the United States was a "nightmare," and that he was "boundlessly happy" to be back in his homeland.

"That's all nonsense," Mr. Stepanov said in an interview. "They simply used me. They decided to make my case an object lesson to other Soviet ballet dancers so as to discourage any more of them from defecting when their companies went on tour abroad."

Interviewed on Snowy Lane

Walking up and down a snowy lane with a dancer's grace and occasional glances over his shoulder to see if he was being followed, the tall, quiet-spoken Russian piece by piece told a story of ambition and remorse, knowingness and naïveté, and fear and fatalism that, allowing for the change of eras, might have come from the pages of Dostoyevsky.

"It began when I was in the chorus of the Moscow Classical Ballet and could see I was getting nowhere artistically," he said. "The better roles were going to people who played politics. And our whole repertory was stagnant — no growth, nothing like ballet in the West."

Mr. Stepanov had seen some Western dance during several trips abroad with the Bolshoi Ballet. When he transferred to the smaller company, he said, he decided to defect at the first opportunity. The chance came when the Moscow Classical Ballet went to Italy. On Jan. 21, 1980, he applied for asylum at the American Embassy in Rome.

In defecting, Mr. Stepanov left behind his wife, Lyuba, a dancer with the Bolshoi Ballet, his mother and a brother, who is a surgeon.

"I knew there might be difficulties for them because of my action," he said, "but I hoped, remembering other cases, that it would not be serious. Besides, Lyuba was to go on a Bolshoi tour to Japan, and I planned to make contact with her in Tokyo."

Yet, according to his account, a sense of guilt kept nagging at him, and when he arrived in the United States and found a $500-a-week job with the New Jersey Ballet in West Orange he began telephoning his family and friends in Moscow.

"I called night after night but could not get through," he said. "The Moscow operator kept saying there was no one there.

"I was happy with my work. For the first time in my life I knew what it was to work creatively with other dancers. Everything was fine, but I had to know if there had been any reprisals in Moscow. I suffered, imagining what might have happened."

In February 1980 Sulamith Mikhailovna Messerer, a distinguished Soviet dance instructor, defected in Tokyo with her son, Mikhail, a Bolshoi dancer. Arriving in the United States, the Messerers told Mr. Stepanov that as soon as he defected his wife had been taken off the list for the Japanese tour.

This information, inflating his fears, resulted in his decision to "put an end to my unbearable state of uncertainty." Mr. Stepanov went to the United Nations in New York and appealed to the Soviet mission officials who received him to find out if his relatives were all right.

'I No Longer Cared'

"I knew they would reply that if I was concerned about my relatives, I should go back to the Soviet Union," he said. "I was prepared to agree. I no longer cared what happened to me. I felt it was my duty to my family."

The Soviet officials, he said, made just that suggestion and were delighted with his assent. At an interview they arranged with American representatives, he stated that he was leaving of his own free will.

"The Americans said to me, 'Would you like us to tell these Soviet representatives to leave the room so you can speak to us alone?'" Mr. Stepanov said. "Of course I wanted to speak to them alone, to tell them everything, but that would only have angered the Soviet side and undermined my whole purpose."

In Moscow, Mr. Stepanov said, he was met by K.G.B. agents who questioned him closely about his two-month stay in the United States.

"They told me I had betrayed my motherland," he said, "but since I had come back I could rejoin my ballet company if I would make a speech before the group telling them how bad everything had been for me in the United States. I refused."

No Reprisals by Moscow

Mr. Stepanov found that there had been no reprisals against his family, other than not letting his wife go to Tokyo. "Most of the people I knew," he said, "thought I had been a fool to come back."

The security police, he continued, arranged an interview for him with the newspaper Izvestia and coached him the day before on what to say. "The K.G.B. man told me to say I had been led astray by listening to the Voice of America," Mr. Stepanov said, "and when I was on tour in the West I was carried away by the glittering shop windows, but after I defected I realized what a sham it was.

"I didn't say any of that. The two Izvestia correspondents who came asked me very little. One of them asked, 'Is there freedom of expression in America?' And I said, 'Yes.'

"A few days later the K.G.B. man called me and said: 'The article will appear tomorrow. You won't like it but don't be downcast. Time passes and people forget.'"

Mr. Stepanov said the article came as a shock to him. It appeared, he said, that the newspaper had relied more on information from the K.G.B. than from him, since it contained material he had told only his K.G.B. questioners.

"My friends asked me what sort of absurdity I was lending my name to," Mr. Stepanov said. "But they had no contempt for me — they knew I could not have said it. What gave me no peace was the thought of what all those Americans who had been so good to me in Rome and in the United States — what they would think of me. I had to let them know I did not say it."

Long Search for Western Reporters

Mr. Stepanov said it took him almost 10 months to make contact with Western correspondents so that he could deny having made the statements attributed to him. The phone numbers of Western correspondents are not listed in any directory available to ordinary Soviet citizens.

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